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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [LY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SPEAKER BERRI URGES U.S. TO WORK WITH
SYRIA ON IRAQ

REF: STATE 299270

Classified By: Ambassador Vincent M. Battle; reasons 1.5 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador met with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri October 27. The discussion focused principally on Iraq and Syria. Berri, having just returned from Damascus, again tried to impress upon us that Syrian President Asad desires a good relationship with the United States and that Syria is well-positioned to play a positive role in support of U.S. objectives in Iraq. Berri was remarkably uninformed about the details of Hizballah's October 17 challenge to an embassy motorcade in south Lebanon, but expressed the view that embassy personnel should be able to travel freely in the south. Berri intends to block any restoration of relations between Lebanon and Libya until Qaddafi responds satisfactorily on the disappearance of Imam Musa Sadr. End summary.

LEBANESE PARLIAMENTARIANS VISIT DAMASCUS

¶2. (C) Berri visited Damascus October 25-26 with the new Lebanese Parliament committee heads. Syrian President Bashar al-Asad met with the Lebanese deputies and, according to both Berri and Deputy Speaker Elie Ferzeli, was very frank about Syria not wanting any problems with the United States. Berri will return to Damascus next weekend for an extraordinary meeting of Arab League parliamentarians, which he said was called to discuss Israel's October 5 air strike on Syria, and is being held in Damascus as an expression of solidarity with the Syrians. Lebanon will assume the chairmanship of the group of Arab parliamentarians in February for the next two years.

SYRIA, IRAQ AND THE U.S.: WHO NEEDS WHO?

¶3. (C) Berri returned repeatedly to a theme he had emphasized prior to the war in Iraq: that the U.S. needs Syria to help stabilize Iraq -- more than Syria needs the United States. Syria is the only one of Iraq's neighbors that can play such a role, Berri argued. His analysis is that if Turkish troops enter Iraq, they will have trouble first with the Kurds, then with the Shi'a and Sunnis. While Iran might have some influence, the Shi'ites in Iraq are Arabs and many fought against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. The Syrians, on the other hand, already have deep ties with the Kurds. Barzani and Talabani have lived in Damascus. When Saddam Hussein attacked Iraq's Shi'a, many fled to Syria and found a welcome reception there. Among the Sunni populations, elements in the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'ath parties, nominally political opponents, do talk with each other. Finally, the patriarchs for Iraq's Christian minorities can all be found in Damascus. The main impediment to Syria helping stabilize the situation in Iraq, according to Berri, is that Israel will not let the U.S. allow Syria to take on this role.

¶4. (C) Ambassador reminded Berri that the issue of support for terrorism is very much on the table in our relationship with Syria. Berri responded that Syria shares the fight against "Sunni terrorism," but that no one can convince any Arab that Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's actions against Palestinian civilians are not terrorism. Berri lamented that

the problems between the U.S. and the Arab world all start with Israel. He added that Bashar told the Lebanese parliamentarians that the Arabs are partially at fault for not reaching out effectively to make their case to the U.S. and to the American people.

15. (C) Berri remains in close touch with many Shi'ite leaders in southern Iraq, so Ambassador briefed Berri on the arrest of associates of Moqtada al Sadr, per reftel. Berri noted he had received a communication October 27 from Ayatollah Sistani, who said that Sadr had arrived at Sistani's office and tried to see him, but Sistani refused and referred him to his staff. Berri continues to discount Abdel Qadr al-Bakr Hakim as a possible political force, despite his transformation from a "militia" member to a "civilian."

HIZBALLAH CHALLENGE TO EMBASSY MOTORCADE

16. (C) Ambassador recounted the October 17 incidents of Hizballah interference with an embassy motorcade in south Lebanon. Berri was surprised; his impression of the incidents, based on local media reports, was that the U.S. had not provided proper notification to the GOL. He was taken aback to learn that the motorcade was under ISF escort when challenged by Hizballah. Berri's view is that everyone, including all foreign diplomats, should be able to travel freely anywhere in the south.

BUDGET WOES

17. (C) Berri expressed frustration with the debate over the budget, which soon will move to Parliament for consideration. He said he does not support the current budget, nor the fact that there are currently "two budgets" -- one introduced by the government, and one put forward by President Lahoud. Berri repeated a statement he made in a recent speech that Finance Minister Siniora does not have the right "to give up on" implementing Paris II (by submitting a budget not in accordance with Paris II targets), because the Paris II commitments were undertaken by the entire government of Lebanon.

LIBYA NOT TO BE REHABILITATED

18. (C) Berri exploded when the Ambassador asked whether apple exports to Libya might be resumed, following the visits to Libya of Lebanese delegations of politicians and industrial association leaders. Berri refuses to allow relations with Libya to be mended "over commercial issues" and has asked Agriculture Minister Ali Hassan Khalil to explore with the government of Tunisia the possibility of exporting Lebanon's bumper apple crop to Tunisia. Berri said he has been waiting "since 1978" for an answer from Qaddafi on the fate of missing Lebanese Imam Musa Sadr. Berri has sent many messages to Qaddafi, and the Libyan leader's response, until one and a half years ago, was always that Musa Sadr had disappeared in Europe, not Libya. More recently, according to Berri, Qaddafi has "confessed" that Musa Sadr disappeared in Libya -- and Berri said he will not rest until Musa Sadr's body has been returned to Lebanon.

BATTLE